



News Release

WISCONSIN ARMY AND AIR NATIONAL GUARD

Public Affairs Office
2400 Wright Street
Madison, WI 53704

Contact: Kelly Bradley
608-242-3055

April 6, 2005

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NEWS FEATURE

The Courage to Change

*By Staff Sgt. Terry R. Ruggles
Wisconsin National Guard*

They sit in the barracks studying, just the two of them, while the others play ball outside. David and Roberto need the extra book time so they can graduate from the Wisconsin National Guard's Challenge Academy at Fort McCoy. They have made a sort of pact: They have found an apartment to share after graduation, in a city far from their gang-ridden neighborhood in Milwaukee.

"They plan on enrolling in a technical college there to avoid their past and returning to that atmosphere," said Lawrence Hellerude, a senior team leader in the Challenge Academy program.

Roberto is not the young man's real name; we have changed it for his safety. "I was involved in gangs and they were looking for me to like...kill me," he said. "My mom told me that they're looking for me, so that's why I'm moving out."

David was expelled from a previous Challenge Academy class and is now getting a second chance.

"The first time I came here I had trouble following orders and directions. Every time I was given an order I would throw a fit. I didn't take the opportunity to see what I had until I lost it.

"When I got kicked out, I went back home and I started using drugs and alcohol again and that was something I didn't want to do, that's something I didn't want to be around. I don't want to become a low-life, I want to do something good and positive with my life."

A Challenge Academy cadet "has to volunteer, it has to be his decision to come here to change his life," Hellerude said. "It probably wouldn't work out unless he saw a need to be here."

After counseling, and with a lot of help from his mother, David is back at the Challenge Academy and trying to make the most of the opportunity.

Why?

"I've got a little sister, she's twelve, and a little brother, he's sixteen," David said. "I want to set the example for them so they don't start getting bad grades and get influenced by drugs and alcohol."

David hopes to get good grades at technical college, join the Navy, become a Seabee — a member of the Naval Construction Battalions (CBs) — and see the world.

Roberto, born in Mexico and raised in the Milwaukee area, seems quiet, bent over like a man carrying a heavy burden.

- more -

Courage to Change

Page 2

“I’ve got a daughter,” Roberto said, “and my girlfriend told me that I need to change. So, that’s why I came over here, to change.”

Life at the academy is not easy. Cadets concentrate on the academy’s “Eight Core Components”: Academic Excellence, Physical Fitness, Job Skills Training, Service to Community, Health and Hygiene, Responsible Citizenship, Leadership/Followership and Life-Coping Skills.

The transition to the academy’s structured life can be very tough.

“When I first got here,” Roberto said, “I called my mom and asked if she could come and pick me up. She told me I had to stay.

“I stay here because of my daughter. That’s the reason I’m here. Right now I feel like quitting even though we’re almost done.”

Gangs don’t let former members go easily. “I’m kind of scared,” Roberto said, “because once you’re out of the gang, they go for your family. That’s the thing I don’t want.”

He hopes to get a law enforcement degree and get a job with the United States Border Patrol along the U.S.-Mexican border. When he does so, he will have changed his life dramatically. His motive? “For my daughter,” he says.

The Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy provides information on its Web site at www.challengeacademy.org.

#

Editor’s Note: This story was published in the March 2005 issue of *At Ease*, the Wisconsin National Guard magazine. Attached is a PDF of the layout (page 22). All photos on pages 22-25 are available in high resolution TIFs or JPGs, color or grayscale, upon request.

Current News Releases are available at: <http://dma.wi.gov/news.asp>